Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Reinventing the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 10th, 2014

We'll never know exactly what Professor Angus Bowmer was thinking when he started the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in the small town of Ashland in 1935 — the very same year that saw the start of a similar enterprise in San Diego called the Old Globe, then and now. There must have been some viral Shakespearean contagion in the West Coast air.

Two things we can be sure of: Bowmer could not have foreseen that his undertaking, so ambitious for its time, would thrive for 79 years, multiplying from a single theatre to a campus of three (plus a fourth experimental space called the Black Swan), and now owns an annual budget of close to $33 million.

Bowmer *was* ambitious; he could not have made a success of his dream without that kind of drive. But even he would be staggered by the OSF's current numbers: its draw (upward of 125,000 visitors per season from all over the map, filling 407,787 seats or an enviable 87% of capacity over an eight-month, mostly summer season); its reach (school programs and tours serving 70,000 students in four states), and its operating size. This year OSF offered 791 performances of 11 plays in rotating repertory, employing roughly 600 theatre artists, plus at least as many volunteers pitching in to help.

The numbers conceal a more important tale, however. Such sustained growth suggests a level of excellence that has made the Festival and Ashland a recurring destination. Many of its fans travel there year after year, proving there's a hunger in the land for a well-staged menu of live theatre consisting of Shakespeare, yes, but also new work, old work, classics ancient and modern, comedy, tragedy, everything.

Kate Hurster as Ariel and Denis Arndt as Prospero in THE TEMPEST

Judging by the size and enthusiasm of the audience at three performances I attended there this summer, Rauch has not only ratcheted up the budget, but also the general level of interest in the company. The three shows I saw were, first, a thoroughly engaging and complex comic romp adapted from the Marx Brothers' *The Cocoanuts,* and directed with great verve by David Ivers. Second came Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* performed on a gorgeous, simple set of angled platforms by Daniel Ostling, each bathed in richly seductive colors, with OSF veteran Denis Arndt as an almost too vigorous Prospero. Third, in a co-production with the Seattle Repertory Theatre, I saw Robert Schenkkan's *The Great Society,* his second play about the LBJ presidency, engrossing for its politics, but still gestating as drama. The Broadway success of Schenkkan's *All the Way*, his

first play about LBJ and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, originated as an OSF commission and production and went on to Broadway, where it won the 2014 Tony® Award. It provided a huge and unexpected boost to OSF's national image.

Beginner's luck? Maybe, but not entirely.

All the Way was the opening salvo in a long-range plan, dubbed *American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle,* an ambitious multi-year project of new work based on transformational events in America's tumultuous history.

Before moving to Ashland in 2007, Bill Rauch had been running the Cornerstone Theater for 20 years, a unique community-based enterprise based in Los Angeles, co-founded with Alison Carey. It flourished under his tutelage and continues to this day. It was an early indication of Rauch's capacity for turning uncommon ideas into action.

American Revolutions is a different animal altogether, bolder and more daunting. It has brought Rauch and the OSF some powerful early rewards as mentioned above. It has a bigger budget and bigger challenges, but also vision and validity and it will be intriguing to watch it unfold.

I caught up with Rauch recently seeking answers to a number of questions.

OSF Artistic Director Bill Rauch

SD: Can you tell me what brought you to Ashland in the first place?

BR: Libby Appel, my predecessor, brought me in as a guest artist in 2002. She was very good to me and really set me up for success. She hired me every year to direct in all three spaces, both classic work and new work and modern classics, so I got to know the company very well and thought about it a lot. Many of the ideas, whether it was *American Revolutions* or looking at classics outside the Western canon, expanding the classical canon to include other cultures outside of Europe and America, creating a new format for the Green show, those are ideas I brought as a candidate for the job. Of course I learned a ton once I started and made a lot of changes based on what I learned after I started, but I was able to approach the job as a candidate with a lot of ideas already.

OSF has uncommon budgetary challenges incurred by its isolation, its dependence on outside visitors, the number of shows you do (11) and the fact they must be performed in rotating repertory in order to allow that three-day visitor to see a minimum of three productions, if not more. How do you handle that?

The budget was about 23 million when I came on board, now it's 33 million, a pretty dramatic increase over eight years. Actor contracts vary. The shortest is six months and the longest is ten. So it's a six-to-ten-month season based on the roles and the projects.

Everyone works on a year-to-year basis. There are actors who've been here 30-plus years (in one case 40-plus years) who have no more guarantee of future employment than a first-year actor.

Now in practice, there's more turnover with first-year company members than with longer-term veterans. We try to strike a balance, keeping as much of the rep company returning as possible, but

also bringing in the fresh perspective of new company members. This balancing act is based in part on the needs of the plays and also on people's lives. Occasionally people will disappoint me by saying they're not coming back for either personal or professional reasons.

I think in my predecessors' time, it was more cut and dried. You either were in or you were out. Something I try to do is encourage people to come and go. I very deliberately try to say, "look you may disappoint me by not coming back, I may disappoint you by not having a job for you, but you are part of the extended family of this company."

(l-r) Brent Hinkley, John Tufts & Mark Berard as Harpo, Chico & Groucho respectively in THE COCOANUTS

I deliberately have brought people back I didn't have work for, or brought people back who had stepped away, and that has created more of a culture of people feeling it's safe to step away and less devastating if they're asked to step away, because there is the strong possibility of future employment.

That said, there are many company members who own homes in town, who've moved elderly parents here, who are raising children in the school system. We do have a robust education program in November and December, so there are actors who will do a ten-month contract and then two months of the school visit program.

More and more actors are going out on the road with OSF productions. We have *The White Snake* at the Guthrie right now and then it's going to a festival in China. We have both LBJ plays going to Seattle Rep in November and December, and we have our production of *Into the Woods* opening at the Wallis Annenberg Center in Beverly Hills in December. So there are opportunities for year-round employment.

Tell me more about *American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle*.

(l-r) Mark Murphey, Jack Willis & Peter Frechette as Robert McNamara, LBJ & Hubert Humphrey, respectively, in THE GREAT SOCIETY

When it comes to Shakespeare, my personal predilection tends to be modern dress. And, honestly, when I was contemplating applying for this job, I kept thinking there are 65 of the most talented artisans working in our costume shop making period costumes. Am I the right person for this job…?

And then I thought, with my Cornerstone background and my passion for diverse stories of American life, maybe there's a way to combine the resources of the Shakespeare Festival and the commitment to looking at period with my passion for our own country's communities and stories. And somehow that coalesced into the idea commissioning a body of new work that looked at our country's past, in the spirit and on the scale of Shakespeare's history plays, but looking at American history.

So that's where it came from — you seeking a way to find the best intersection of your passions as an artist and OSF's history and resources?

Yes. Originally I wanted to make it all based on the presidencies — one play set during the time of each U.S. president. But hopefully a part of effective leadership is to hire people who are smarter than you are in various ways. So I asked Alison Carey who, of course, was Cornerstone's co-founder with me and is one of my dearest and oldest friends, and asked her to come and run the program.

The first thing she said is "forget this president thing. I don't like equating American presidents with British kings. I don't think that's a good parallel to make." So we took a deep dive into other ways to thematically group the plays, and the passion we landed on is that our country was started in active revolution, and with our polarized landscape now always at the forefront of all partisan debates — What do we hold on to? What do we change? — we thought the frame should be about moments of change: American Revolutions, how our country basically is a never-ending series of changes.

That's how we hit upon the theme. And when we reach out to writers, we tell them it's a themed commission. You have to write about a moment of change in U.S. history, but *you* pick the moment of change you want to write about and we'll support you, connect you with a historian or a series of historians, and help you develop your play.

Why 37 plays? A nod to Shakespeare's canon?

Kate Hurster as Ariel born aloft by dancers Will Cooper, Tim Rubel & Jordon Waters in THE TEMPEST

How did you guess? We toyed with a lower number, but finally, decided on 37. We've also rejected any previously written submissions, even if they're thematically right. The commissions will all be for new writing.

Until this year we would select a writer or an ensemble of writers and ask them to be part of the program, whether they had an initial idea or not. So there are writers we commissioned that first year who still haven't developed an idea. Other people were clear right away, such as Robert Schenkkan who, as a Texan, immediately said he wanted to write about LBJ.

We're beginning to dip our toes in the water of soliciting proposals. For instance, we really want to do something on the environment and climate change, so we put out a request and received 35 proposals on that theme. We're going to select a writer out of those proposals.

We're over the hump now. We've committed 21 of the 37 plays, so as we come down hill through the last batch of commissions over the next four or five years, we may say no one's written about the Revolutionary War, this is not acceptable. We'll do a request for proposals on the Revolutionary War. Obviously, that's a fictional example.

We know this will not be a comprehensive survey of moments of change. Writers have been more attracted to write about the last 50 years of our country's history than the first 200, but we want there to be as much variety of themes and time periods as possible. It'll be intriguing to see how that plays out.

I find it surprising there has not been more interest in slavery and the Civil War.

You know, the African American community's relationship to the Civil War is a very complex one. There was a very influential article in *The Atlantic* in June of this year by Ta-Nehisi Coates about reparations, so we became obsessed with commissioning an African American writer to write about the Civil War. Dominique Morisseau has just accepted the challenge and we're very, very excited about that.

I hear that some OSF patrons have complained they're not seeing enough Shakespeare. Is that true?

Yes, but I reminded them that I've also committed to doing the entire canon over the next ten years, which is the smallest window of time in which we've ever done it. That's a pretty aggressive commitment to our namesake playwright, so I basically disagree. Since 1970 there has been on average four Shakespeares a year. My predecessor, Libby Appel, had one year where she did three and one year where she did five. I've continued to do four. Next year I'm doing three.

About *All The Way* and *The Great Society*. They are two separate plays, but linked by their subject. Do they take up two slots or one in your 37-play Cycle?

Jack Wills as LBJ in THE GREAT SOCIETY

Good question. In fact, *All the Way* is an *American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle* commission, but we wanted to spread the wealth and not have any repeats of playwrights. So *The Great Society* was commissioned by Seattle Rep, Seattle being Robert Schenkkan's home theatre. We helped develop it with the OSF company that created *All the Way*. And of course Seattle Rep was very generous in allowing us to premiere it in Ashland. We'll be taking it up to Seattle in a rolling world premiere to run with *All the Way*. So technically *All the Way* is an American Revolutions commission, *The Great Society* is not, but it's got American Revolutions' fingerprints all over it.

As well as yours, since you've directed both productions.

Well, I was lucky to get to work so closely with Robert. I'm so happy for him, personally and professionally. The fact that *All the Way*, OSF's first play on Broadway, was a 20-actor historic drama, won the Tony Award and broke box office records for selling more dollars-worth of tickets for a straight play in the history of Broadway, is just so unlikely. A unique Cinderella story.

I see that it also already has recoupled its initial investment. Can one assume that *Great Society* may be headed for Broadway as well?

I can't say that that's a fact — but I share your hope.

View of the Allen Elizabethan Theatre & and some of the OSF campus

This entry was posted on Wednesday, September 10th, 2014 at 1:00 pm and is filed under Theatre
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.